

The Religious and Spiritual Life of the Jews in Medina, by Haggai Mazuz. Brill, 2014. Brill Reference Library in Judaism 38. 132pp., Hb. \$120.00 / €99.00. ISBN-13: 9789004250628.

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Haggai Mazuz has written an interesting book that looks into the religion and customs of the Jews in Medina. It is one of the stimulating books on this topic after Gordon Newby's *A History of the Jews of Arabia: From Ancient Times to Their Eclipse under Islam*. Mazuz suggests that the Jews of Medina, whom Muḥammad dealt with, are most likely rabbinic Jews concurring with Gotein and Newby. Although Mazuz relies greatly on Islamic tradition to deduce the life of the Jews in Medina, he does raise many valid points. He brings forth several examples that the Jews of Medina were most likely aware of the oral tradition as stated in the Talmudic teachings of rabbinic Judaism. The book is concise containing only four chapters with an introduction and a conclusion. Mazuz dedicates the first chapter to describe the leaders of the Jewish tribes in Medina, the second chapter to illustrate their laws and customs, the third chapter to elaborate on their religious beliefs, and the final chapter to depict their external appearance.

Although the author acknowledges that the only sources we have about the Jews of Medina are from Islamic traditions, which has been purported with skeptical eyes from revisionists, such as John Wansborough, Patricia Crone, and Andrew Rippin, he does shed light to at least some of the Jews that Muslims might have encountered during the time that Islamic tradition had been written. Mazuz takes the Islamic tradition for granted, when it is under a great amount of hostility in recent scholarship regarding its reliability in portraying history. It might have been helpful if Mazuz engages with some of the revisionists' claims.

What has surprised me is that Mazuz does not use Q. 5:32, "Because of that We decreed upon the Children of Israel that whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or for corruption in the land, it is as if he had slain humanity entirely. And whoever saves one, it is as if he had saved humanity entirely," as evidence for the Qur'an's engagement with the Talmud. Q. 5:27–32 puts this in the context of Cain killing his brother Abel. Both

the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud also put this statement in the context of Cain killing his brother Abel (Sanhedrin 4:5). There is one difference in that the Babylonian Talmud talks about killing or saving an Israelite, while some versions of the Jerusalem Talmud universalizes it to any soul like that seen in the Qur'an. If Mazuz has used this example in the Qur'an, he would have given a shred of evidence on what kind of Jews the Qur'an is in conversation with, without necessarily bringing up evidence from the Islamic tradition at which recent scholars have been looking at with a lot of suspicion.

Nonetheless, based on the Islamic sources, Mazuz gives us a picture of what rules the Medinan Jews held so stringently, such as observing the Sabbath to the extent that they would not violate the Sabbath for any reason that the Talmud would have forbidden them. Moreover, Mazuz also illustrates some rules in the Torah that the Medinan Jews offset with more lenient Talmudic teachings, such as the punishment of adultery.

Mazuz does bring some insight on what the Qur'an (e.g. Q. 4:46, 5:13, 5:41) may mean where it accuses that some Jews changed words (*yuḥarrifūn*) apparently of the Torah. Mazuz states that Talmudic sages would sometimes split a word in two parts to change its meaning. Sometimes, he states, the Talmudic sages would change a word by adding, subtracting, or moving a letter to achieve a homiletic interpretation, which apparently the Qur'an rejects. One may infer that the Qur'an is not necessarily stating that the Torah has been falsified, but that the Talmud might have changed the interpretation of the rulings in the Torah. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy to state that the Qur'an does not name what is being changed and from where. Although it is assumed to be changes on the Torah, the Qur'an makes no explicit reference to it. Therefore, it may or may not be what Mazuz asserts, a reference to some homiletic interpretation that the Talmudic sages sometimes did, but it might be plausible.

Mazuz uses an interesting method to some of his deductions based on the principle of "*mukhālafah*," where Muḥammad instructed his followers not to imitate the Jews. He provides some examples of the customs of the Medinan Jews that he uses to infer they were rabbinic. For example, according to Islamic tradition, Muḥammad instructed the fast of '*āshūrā*' after he observed the Jews fasting in that period. However, at a later time, some of his companions requested that they would not want to imitate the Jews and Christians. Consequently, Muḥammad has allegedly said that if he lives to the next year, he would fast the ninth in addition

to the tenth. Mazuz states that fasting the daytime of the ninth (*erev Yom Kippur*) is prohibited in the Talmud, and if Muḥammad wanted to differentiate himself from the Jews of Medina, then the Jews most likely observed the Talmud. This might seem as a leap to conclude this from such an example, but the theory, to the very least, might be plausible.

Some examples in the book seem a bit interesting, but Mazuz uses earlier scholars' conclusions such as the number of Muslim daily prayers is five because Islam chose the middle path between Eastern Christians, who prayed seven times a day, and the Jews, who prayed three times a day. Nonetheless, Mazuz's main issue in such argument is that the Medinan Jews prayed three times a day, regardless of the reason of why Islam chose five. However, Mazuz misses to use a story from Islamic tradition on the number of daily prayers, which might have supported his argument. According to Islamic tradition, the five daily obligatory prayers were a gift from God to Muḥammad, during his Night Journey and Ascension. According to that tradition, the initial number of daily prayers was fifty, but after Muḥammad encountered Moses while returning from God, Moses convinced Muḥammad to ask God for a reduction. This encounter happened several times until the number of daily prayers was reduced to five. Although Moses continued to try to convince Muḥammad for a further reduction, Muḥammad shied away from it. This tradition might suggest that during the time the tradition was collated, Muslims perhaps encountered Jews who do indeed pray three times a day, or at least, less than five.

Mazuz provides us with insight of the custom of growing sidelocks, with which the Medinan Jews were accustomed as the Yemenite Jews are. He suggests that though there is some speculation on when Yemenite Jews had travelled from the Land of Israel, there is some agreement that they passed through the Hījāz. As such, they might have established communities along the way in Hījāz, including Medina. He suggests that this custom might have originated among Jews, who were living south of the Land of Israel along the frontier of northern Arabia, in order to distinguish themselves from pagan Arabs, who according to Herodotus used to shave their sidelocks. Therefore, when these Jews traversed southward into Arabia establishing Jewish communities along the way, they continued to practice the custom. This is a hypothesis, which of course we cannot prove, but it is perhaps an interesting hint at some relation between the Jews of Medina and those of Yemen.

Although the book tries to argue that Medinan Jews were most likely observing the rabbinic tradition, the author shows some examples in

which the Jews of Medina were occasionally lenient regarding some rules, such as allowing priests (*kohanim*) to marry divorced women. Mazuz makes a case that the reason is not due to weak observance of the law, as suggested by Goitein, but a response to a reality, in which many divorced women in the community would not have an option of a non-priest groom. Here, Mazuz seems brave to undermine his own argument that the Jews of Medina were rabbinic Jews who generally followed halakhic rules and regulations. However, if the Jews of Medina were indeed precursors of rabbinic Judaism that followed halakhic rules deeply, then this might be evidence that the two Jewish tribes in Medina, who were thought to have been of priestly descent, Banū al-Naḍīr and Banū Qurayẓa, were perhaps not.

Mazuz also addresses the religious beliefs of Medinan Jews, such as the belief in an afterlife and angels. He states that the Qur'an sometimes specifically engages with Talmudic teachings regarding such beliefs. For example, the Qur'an admonishes Jews who believe they will only be punished in hell for few days (Q. 2:80), which is likely an attack on a Talmudic teaching that the longest period the wicked will be punished in hell is twelve months (Shabbat 2:6, 33B).

Mazuz provides a great amount of scholarship on the Jews of Medina that can be deduced from Islamic tradition. The most important conclusion is that the Jews of Medina followed a rabbinic tradition of Judaism. They are not followers of some obscure Jewish sect who claimed that Ezra is the son of God. As such, we should be searching for further clues on the issues of what the Qur'an accuses the Jews with taking into consideration that the Qur'an is most likely engaging with precursors of rabbinic Judaism and their interpretation of scriptures based on the Talmud.

Although I agree with many scholars who state that we should take the Islamic tradition with caution, not in the sense as eliminating it, but to a great extent not taking it blindly for granted, Mazuz seems to have used Islamic tradition very freely in ways to prove that the Medinan Jews were most likely of the rabbinic tradition. Although he has used some examples from such traditions a little more liberally than many scholars might appreciate, there are some examples in the Qur'an, such as Q. 5:27-32, that suggest the Jews in the Qur'an might truly have been precursors of rabbinic Judaism. We must keep in mind the possibility that the Jews in the Qur'an may not even be in Medina, if we view their history from Islamic tradition with suspicion. Nonetheless, the Jews in the

Qur'an being precursors of rabbinic Judaism might hold true even if we do not accept many of the other stories from Islamic tradition. Regardless, Mazuz has elaborated on the religious practices of Jews that Muslims might have come across during the time Islamic tradition was being arranged and reported. To the very least, this book does provide scholarship about these Jews whom the Muslims might have encountered.